Ida Bengtson

NIH Eminent Scientist Profiles

Ida Albertina Bengtson (1881–1952)

Ida Bengtson, Ph.D., was the first female Ph.D. to be employed as a scientist at the Public Health Service's Hygienic Laboratory, starting in 1916 at a salary of $1,800 per year. Dr. Bengtson's parents were Swedish immigrants to Harvard, Nebraska. She majored in mathematics and languages at the University of Nebraska, graduating in 1903. Finding that being a cataloguer at the U.S. Geological Survey library was not so interesting, Dr. Bengtson heeded the advice of a friend and went back to school for a M.S. and Ph.D. in bacteriology—the cutting edge of science at the time—from the University of Chicago. Hired by Hygienic Laboratory director Dr. George McCoy, Dr. Bengtson discovered in 1917 that an outbreak of tetanus was linked to contaminated vaccine scarifiers. Bengtson had many triumphs in her career: proving that an infantile paralysis was caused by a new variety of botulism, Clostridium botulinum (type C); aiding the development of the typhus vaccine; and developing the complement fixation test still in use for the detection and differentiation of rickettsial diseases such as endemic and epidemic typhus, Rocky Mountain spotted fever, and Q fever. In her research she came down with typhus herself. She was internationally recognized for her pioneering work. The thousands of women scientists at NIH owe Ida Bengtson a debt of gratitude because if Dr. Bengtson had not proved so adept, one questions if McCoy would have continued to hire women scientists.

Read her paper on the complement fixation test and see her entry on Wikipedia. Dr. Bengtson also is included on our "Early Women Scientists at NIH" page.

Ida Bengtson National Institutes of Health